We Are the Continuation of Our Ancestors

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Good morning my dear friends.

Today is the twenty-first of July 1997. We are in the Upper Hamlet. I have a picture of me as a baby monk I want to share, to show you, especially the young people. I was seventeen. And then I have a picture of mine when I was sixteen. You see the difference after one year of practice. I have to tell you that I was a novice practicing with other novices and I had a great time. I was a very happy novice. I think it is very important to be happy when you are a novice because if you are happy as a novice, you will be happy as a monk. So you might like to pass it around and look closely at the baby monk. Maybe we'll have to print several copies for the children.

A few years ago there was a reporter. He is of American origin, but he lives in Denmark. He is a filmmaker, also. He came to my hut and interviewed me with his big, huge camera. One of the questions he asked is this, "Thay, if today the Buddha and Jesus met on the street, what do you think they would tell each other?" And this is my answer. "There is no if, because they are meeting each other every day. They are telling each other many things. Because you don't look deeply, you don't listen deeply, that is why you have not seen them meeting every day and exchanging every day." I said that because in my mind it is clear that the Buddha is here and Jesus is also here.

We are the continuation of the Buddha and of Jesus. The son is always the continuation of the father. Everyone has to agree upon this fact. Scientist or nonscientist, theologian or non-theologian, they have to accept the fact that the son, the daughter, is the continuation of the father and also the mother. In fact, they are the father and the mother. So it is absurd to say, "I don't want to have anything to do with my father."

There are people who get angry with their father and make the declaration, "I don't what to have anything to do with him." That would be impossible, because he, whether he wants or not, he is the continuation of his father. He is his father. That is why the only thing for him to do is to practice reconciliation within. Because his father is within him, there is no way of getting rid of his father. There are people who are angry with their mother, and they feel the same. They want to forget her. They don't want to have anything to do with her. Is that possible? No. They are the continuation of their mothers. They are their mothers. They cannot escape. That is why the practice is to go back and to reconcile with the mother within and with the father within.

We have blood parents, we have blood ancestors; but we have also our spiritual parents, our spiritual ancestors. The Buddha is my spiritual ancestor. I was born from him. I am his continuation. I am him. Later on in life I have adopted Jesus as another spiritual ancestor. In me they are alive. I do not have any conflict with them as I do not have any conflict with my blood parents and ancestors. This is a very important practice.

I am the Buddha and you are the Christ, because I am the continuation of the Buddha and you are the continuation of Jesus Christ. And we are seeing each other every day and we are talking with each other every day. And, it's silly to say, "If today the Buddha and the Christ met each other, what would they say to each other?" They have to meet each other. They have to say things to each other every day, because that is also for the sake of peace. If people of different religious affiliations do not see each other, do not meet each other, do not talk to each other, then peace will not be possible. So, I told the reporter that they are meeting every day and I wish them success.

Now, children, let's listen to this. You might wonder whether the Buddha is a person or where he is, because in the drawings you make and give to me you like to draw the Buddha. Where is the Buddha now? How can we touch him, see him and talk to him? Is he a he or maybe a she? Is there one Buddha only, or are there many Buddhas? These are very interesting questions and you have to ask yourself and to ask your friends.

There is a Buddha whose name is Shakyamuni, and I have adopted him as a teacher, but I know that besides him there are many other Buddhas. And there are part time Buddhas, there are full time Buddhas. We have to get rid of the idea that the Buddha is a god. No, the Buddha is not a god. The Buddha may be a human being like you and I. But the Buddha may be a deer or a squirrel. Because anyone, anything that is animated by Buddha nature can be described as Buddha. Buddha nature, what is it? Buddha nature in Sanskrit is *Buddhata*.

Buddha nature is inherent in every one of us, not only humans, but nonhumans as well.

I'd like to tell you about the Buddha nature that is in us. It is like electricity. I believe that electricity is. There is such a thing as electricity because I have seen electricity manifested in many forms. In the dark, you turn on the light and you have light. That is a manifestation of electricity, right? It is very hot, and you turn on the fan, and you have the wind. Well, that wind is made by electricity, so electricity is seen in the form of the wind. And when you open your refrigerator to take some ice cream, you see that the cold in there, the capacity to retain the cold, to keep your ice cream not melting, that is also electricity. When you drive your car, if the car can run like that it means electricity is there. There is something that can help generate electricity and that electricity can propel your car or your airplane.

I know that electricity exists because I have seen light, I have seen the wind, I have seen the cold, I have seen the force driving the car. You cannot say that electricity is just the light, or electricity is just the wind. No. So, Buddhahood, Buddha nature, can be seen in a person like Shakyamuni but Buddha nature can be seen in other forms. You yourself, you have the Buddha nature in you. If you know how to touch it, if you know how to nurture it, then the Buddha nature will manifest in you and you have more peace, more joy, more stability, more freshness. That is why to practice meditation is to touch the Buddha nature in you and to help it manifest so that you feel much better. That is why I have offered you the practice of pebble meditation.

Yesterday I talked about what you can give. First of all, I said the most precious thing you can give to the people you love is your true presence. In order to be truly present, you have only to breathe in and breathe out and become fresh like a flower. And you go to her, go to him, the person you love, and say, "Darling, I'm really here for you." This is a gift. I also said that you have to offer your freshness. In order to be fresh, you know what to do. Relax, breathe in, breathe out, smile. Put down your worry, your anger, and you become fresh. That is something you can offer to people you love.

There is a young practitioner among us and his name is Bao-tich and he is four years old, or four years young. He just celebrated his fourth birthday a few days ago and he has a very nice practice. Every time he gets agitated, his mother invites him to sit like a Buddha. My dear little boy, it does not seem that the Buddha nature in you is so evident. So, would you like to sit down in the lotus position and practice breathing and smiling so that the Buddha will come back into your heart? And Bao-tich always listens to his mother, and practices sitting

down. He sits very beautifully and after a few minutes, he says, "Mommy, touch me to see whether the Buddha is already clear." And his mother will touch him and say, "It begins to be clear, so continue sitting for another minute." So after Bao-tich has become still and serene and peaceful, his mother will touch him again and say, "Now the Buddha in you is very clear, so go and play, my darling." So Bao-tich is very glad and runs and plays again. He is there. He promised that next year he will speak English.

I would like you to practice the same. You may recuperate the Buddha nature in you very quickly. We have made a song for you to practice. "Flower - Fresh. Mountain - Solid. Water - Reflecting. Space - Free." You need only to use four of your pebbles—one pebble for Flower; one pebble for Mountain; one pebble for Water; and one pebble for Space. This can be practiced with music.

Suppose this is the pebble for Flower. You put it on the palm of your hand and you practice breathing in, breathing out three times with the flower in mind. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower." You do it in such a way that you become a real flower. It is not difficult: if you want to be a flower, you will be a flower. Relax. Smile. Smile with your eyes. Smile with your mouth. Smile with your ears. Smile with your body. You can do it. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower." In fact, we are all flowers. Human beings are a kind of flower. If you don't look exactly like a flower it is because you have not taken good care of yourself, you have cried too much, you have dried yourself up. You have allowed sorrow and worry to enter you and destroy you. So, recuperate. Restore your flower-ness. This is one of the ways to do it. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower." This is not imagination. You are a flower. You have the right to recuperate your flower-ness.

There are many of us when we grow old—sixty, seventy, eighty—we are able to retain our flower-ness. Congratulations to you who are able to do so. I have seen people eighty, ninety, still very fresh. We have to admire these people. We have to follow their example. We have to learn from them how to retain our flower-ness. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh. You know, a flower does not seem to do anything, but without flowers, life would seem very sad. So you don't have to do anything. If you can be a flower, you serve the world. "Breathing out I feel fresh." You do that three times, you pick up the pebble and you put it on your right.

Now you pick up another pebble. This pebble's name is Mountain. You know that stability is very important. A stable child, a stable adult, can inspire people and make them happy. Stability is very important. The image of the mountain can help you to practice. "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain." Nothing can

assault me. If you have a stable position for your body, if you know how to sit erect; if you know how to enjoy your in-breath and out-breath, and become the master of yourself, then any provocation, any sorrow, anything you imagine cannot shake you. So you stay solid like a mountain.

"Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel solid." Solid as a mountain, that is our practice. You learn to be solid in your sitting position and then you will learn to be solid in your way of walking. You will be solid in your way of driving. You will be a solid driver. When you cook your dinner, you can practice your solidity, also. Three times. "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel solid." And you put aside the second pebble.

Now you pick up the third pebble. The name of the third pebble in this practice is Still Water. Not just water, still water. There are times when you look at the water you see it very still. So still you can see the blue sky and the white clouds in it. You can see the trees reflected in it, exactly like up there. If you have a camera, you just aim at the surface of the lake and take the picture. When you develop it people might think that you took it from up there because the image is so faithful. So when your mind is calm, still like that water, you will reflect everything as it is. You don't distort things. You don't have wrong perceptions; because wrong perceptions make you angry, make you suffer.

The Buddha said wrong perceptions are the ground of all our suffering. The other person does not want to destroy us but we still think that she is trying to destroy us. The other person is not trying to make us suffer, but we believe that his intention is to punish us. When we see a piece of rope in the twilight, we might think that it is a snake, but it is not a snake. In the twilight, you are walking and suddenly you see a snake. You scream and you run away. When your friend brings in a torch, you realize that it is not a snake at all. It is only a piece of rope. That is what we call a wrong perception. A wrong perception always makes us suffer and that is why we have to learn to see things as they are and not distort them. It is very important to practice being calm like still water because still water can reflect things as they are. Breathing in, I see myself as still water. Breathing out, I reflect things as they truly are.

Lastly, freedom, space. "Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free." People who have space within don't suffer. People who have space around them, they don't suffer. It's like the moon. Look at the moon traveling in the empty sky. It has a lot of space around it. The moon is serene, happy. But we, sometimes, we don't have space inside. We are full of worries, of anger, of fear, of projects, of desire. We don't allow ourselves to have space inside, and there is no space outside at all. We don't feel that we have the time. We don't feel that we

have space to move around. What kind of life are we having? When we love someone, we love in such a way that we no longer have any time, any space and we deprive the person we love of space and time, and love becomes a prison for us and for the other person. That is not true love. If you love someone and if that someone isn't capable of moving any more, that's not love. So space is a very big gift. You have to offer him space if you want him to be truly happy. Offering him space inside. Offering him space outside around him. This is a very important practice. We will learn how to put more space inside and to arrange so that we have plenty of space around us. That is very crucial for our happiness.
"Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free."

Many people in their lives buy a lot of ropes and tie themselves up and finally, they cannot move. First they think that these ropes are very much needed for their happiness. I would not be happy if I don't have that rope. The rope of fame. The rope of wealth. There are many kinds of ropes. I would not be happy if I could not buy that rope. So we buy all kinds of ties. Not only one to put around our necks but several kinds of ties to put around our bodies, our feelings, our perceptions and finally we can no longer move. We have no space. Happiness is impossible. That is why we have to practice to free ourselves and to put into ourselves a lot of space and around us also. This is a technique of liberation.
"Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free."

During the practice we develop our flower-ness. We develop our solidity. We develop our calm, stillness and we develop our freedom. These qualities combined together we call Buddha nature. If Bao-tich sits still, that means he wants to recuperate, to restore some of his Buddha nature so that he becomes more calm, more joyful, more loving. All of you can do like him and also, even better, you can become like a Buddha. So the Buddha is not something outside. The Buddha may be a person like Shakyamuni. But the Buddha nature should be in you and if you practice well you can touch that Buddha nature in you and you will develop your flower-ness, your solidity, your freedom and your stillness.

Let us ask someone to sing "Breathing in, Breathing out" for us. Let us sit beautifully and practice. We don't sing with her. We just practice the song. And, I am doing the movements. If you like you can do the movements, but the movements are not enough. We have to breathe and become a real flower and to become a real mountain. When I breathe in, I see myself as a mountain; I really feel I am a mountain.

Breathing in, breathing out,
Breathing in, breathing out,
I am blooming as a flower,
I am fresh as the dew.

I am solid as a mountain,
I am firm as the earth,
I am free.

Breathing in, breathing out,
Breathing in, breathing out,
I am water, reflecting,
What is real, what is true.

And I feel there is space
Deep inside of me,
I am free, I am free, I am free.

You see, meditation can be fun. There are many ways of practicing meditation, and you can meditate in music as well. Now I would like to offer Bao-tich, the young people, and the less young the practice of visiting the Buddha within. Don't think that this statue is the Buddha. It's made of clay only. We want the real Buddha. The real Buddha is made of these four elements: freshness, solidity, stillness and freedom. And you know that these elements are within. I like to touch the real Buddha and not the clay Buddha. A clay Buddha is sometimes helpful because it helps us to go home to touch the real Buddha.

You may sit down beautifully and you breathe in, breathe out a few times and you put your right hand on your heart and you say, "Hello, Little Buddha, are you there?" You ask first the question, "Hello, my little Buddha, are you there?" And you listen. You listen with all your heart. If you are too agitated, too troubled, you might not hear the little Buddha answering you very clearly. So you ask him for the second time, "Hello, little Buddha, are you there?" If you pay attention, you will hear his voice or her voice, "Yes, I am here." But it may not be very clear. The voice of the Buddha becomes clearer and clearer as you become calmer and more solid. You may ask for the third time, "Hello, little Buddha are you there?" And you listen. This time the Buddha's voice is very clear, "Yes, surely, I am always there for you."

Remember the first mantra. The Buddha is practicing the first mantra. "I am always there for you, my darling." And then when you hear the voice of the Buddha in you, you say, "I am very glad. You are my freshness. You are my flower-ness." And the Buddha says, "Yes, I am your freshness, your flower-ness." Do try to cultivate your flower-ness. And then you say, "Dear Buddha, you are also my stability. You are a mountain in me." And you listen, and the Buddha says, "Yes, I am your stability. I am you solidity. I am the mountain in

you." You hear it. You hear the Buddha answering you very clearly. Sometime if you speak English, the voice will be in English. If you speak German, the voice will be in German. I am sure, because that is your Buddha.

"Dear Buddha, you are my stillness, my calm, is that right?" And the Buddha says, "Yes, I am your stillness. I am your calm." You become glad and you say, "Dear Buddha, you are my freedom. You are space within me and around me." And the Buddha in you will say, "Yes. I am your freedom. I am space in you and surrounding you. And you say, "Dear little Buddha, I am very glad that you are there for me." And the Buddha says, "Yes. I am always there for you. I am glad that you visit. Come and visit often." You say, "Dear Buddha, I need you very much. Without you, I would suffer." And the Buddha says, "Yes, I will try my best to be with you all the time, and I also need you. If you visit me often, I will be clearer. I will be more apparent and I can help you better."

Visiting the Buddha at least once a day is important. If you get agitated several times a day, it is very important to visit your Buddha several times a day. This is the end of your Dharma talk. When you hear the bell, stand up, bow to the Sangha and go out to continue your learning and practice.

[Bell, the children leave]

My dear friends, it is very important to make a connection with our ancestors and the future generations. Alienation is a kind of sickness. There are people who don't feel they are connected with anything at all and they suffer from being cut off, from loneliness. There is no understanding. There is no love that can nourish them. Therefore, to practice restoring the connection is very important.

I always feel that I am the continuation of my ancestors. Every day I practice touching my ancestors. In my country every home has an altar for ancestors, blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors. An altar is just a table, but it is very important. You place that table in the central part of your house and you focus your attention on the table as the point of contact between you and your ancestors. Usually every morning we come and offer some incense to our ancestors. Our ancestors do not need to smell incense, but we want to light a stick of incense to our ancestors because the practice of lighting incense focuses our attention on the presence of our ancestors. During the time you strike the match, you light the stick of incense, you offer the incense on the table, you have an opportunity to touch your ancestors within yourself. You realize that your ancestors are always alive in you because you are the continuation of your ancestors.

In your sitting meditation you can practice like this, "Daddy, I am your son. I am your daughter." That is a fact. You know it so well, but you don't feel it sometimes. You feel that your father is one person and you are another person. But in fact that is not so. You are a very real continuation of your father. It is like the plant of corn is the continuation of the seed of corn. Although the statement is very simple, you have to perceive it, to feel it, to live the reality of it. "Daddy, I am your daughter, I am your son." No matter how hard it is for you to make the statement, you have to make it because that is the truth. Even if between you and your father there is a lot of difficulty, you still are his continuation. You are still him. All the sufferings that he endured may be still in you, and it is up to you to work for the transformation. If you are able to transform the suffering in you, you have your father in you; you practice for both of you.

Maybe when you were young, you suffered so much already you are determined to be very different from your father. You will never do what he has done to you. You were so determined, and yet because you don't know how to transform the energies that has been transmitted by him to you, when you grow up, you have the tendency to behave exactly like he did. That is called the wheel of *samsára*, the vicious circle. We know we hate that. We don't want to do it, but we still continue to do exactly that. We make our children our partners suffer also.

The habit energy is transmitted from generation to generation. The only way is to recognize that you are just the continuation of your father, your mother; you are him, you are her, and you are determined to practice to liberate you, to liberate him at the same time. That is your blood ancestor. Your ancestors have transmitted to you many positive seeds, but also many negative seeds. It is up to you to practice to develop the positive seeds and to diminish and to transform the negative seeds. The essential is to learn how to do it, learning from the Dharma, learning from the Sangha.

We know that the practice here is to cultivate mindfulness to be able to recognize the tendency, the habit energy, every time it begins to show itself. Not fighting, not suppressing, but just recognizing and embracing it with the energy of mindfulness so that it will not continue its course of destruction. If you allow it to go on its way, there will be damage done to you and to the people you love. You did not want to say that, you did not want to do that, but you said that, you did that anyway because you don't know how to take care of that habit energy. That is why there must be continued practice in order to generate the energy of mindfulness for the recognition and transformation of this habit energy.

And then there are your children and your grandchildren, your blood children. You know that they have inherited some of your habit energies. The habit

energies you have received from your ancestors and also have transmitted to them. In each cell in your body you can find everything. Each cell of our body contains all the habit energies of all generations of ancestors.

You have heard of the techniques of cloning, and now we are in a position to be able to clone humans. They just take one cell and arrange to have that cell be in a position to reproduce another you. And that once again proves the teaching of the Buddha to be very close to the scientific findings of our times, that one contains the all. That is the teaching of the *Avatamsaka*, that one contains the all. So one cell in our body can contain the whole universe, can contain all our former generations, our ancestors. So you have transmitted all of that to your children and grandchildren. You don't know. It's very quick. But you have transmitted millions and millions of things to them in just one second or less. The positive and the negative at the same time you have transmitted. You are a link between your ancestors and your children. You have received and your have transmitted. You know that your children, if they are lucky, they will meet someone to help them to nourish the positive things and to transform the negative things. Otherwise, they'll carry you very far into the future without any chance of transformation and healing.

If you have the chance to practice, to do the work of transformation and healing, you may be able to help your child, your children, your grandchildren to do so. Because, if you are the continuation of your ancestors, your children are a continuation of you and you help link your children with your ancestors. You help your ancestors to link with your children.

The same thing is true with our spiritual ancestors. When I teach a young monk or a young nun or a young lay person, I always have the image that that young person is going to continue me and to continue my spiritual ancestors. So that the main thing for me to do is to transmit the best things I have received from my spiritual ancestors, only. I survive with my disciples. They will be my continuation. That is why I focus so much attention and energy and time and love toward the teaching, because that is the only way to be kind to my ancestors' transmission, transmitting the best.

There are two ways. My disciples, my students, are my continuation. My student, my disciple needs me to get connected with his or her spiritual ancestors. In me I carry the Buddha, the patriarch, my teachers and it is that sense of the Buddha, the patriarch, the teachers that I transmit to my disciples. So, my disciple needs me to get linked with all the ancestors. I serve as the link. And I need my disciple to get linked with the future generations, because without him, without her, the best things I received from my ancestors will not

be transmitted. I rely on my disciples to continue the lineage and to transmit the best things from the lineage of ancestors down to further generations. We need each other. My disciple needs me to get linked with all spiritual ancestors and I need him or her to continue me, and ancestors in the future. We need each other. This should be true with our blood family also.

When you practice meditation, which means to practice looking deeply into yourself, you see that your ancestors are still there in you. They are still there in you, alive, just because you are there. Look at this hand. You will say that this is my hand. Right, but not enough. This is also the hand of my mother. This is also the hand of my father. This is the hand of my ancestor. Remember when you were a small child. You had a fever and your mother came and she put her hand on your forehead, and felt so good. Your mother may have passed away, and you remember that lovely hand, that gentle hand, and you miss it. Still, if you look deeply into your hand, you see this is also your mother's hand. "Breathing in, I know this is also the hand of my mother. Breathing out, the hand of my mother is on my forehead." So, the hand of your mother is still available at any time. The hand of your father, the hand of your ancestors is always available, because your hand is there.

The idea of me and mine may be an obstacle. Yes, there is me, there is mine, but this is also him and his, her and hers. That is the fruit of the practice of looking deeply. This hand is also the hand of the Buddha. These feet are also the feet of the Buddha, because without the Buddha, I would not be able to make peaceful steps on this planet and to get the nourishment I need and all of us need. Without the Buddha, without my teachers, how could I have been able to walk peacefully with stability, with freedom and solidity, and with joy? This foot is my foot. This foot is also my mother's, my father's and of the Buddha's. Where else do I have to go to find my mother, my father and the Buddha? No, I don't have to go anywhere. I just touch myself deeply and I touch them all. They are always alive in me.

If you practice like that, alienation will no longer be a problem. You think you are too alone. Everyone has let you down. No, that is not true. That is an imagination. That is an illusion. The Buddha is always with you and Jesus is always with you. Your ancestors are always with you, your children also. They are always with you. Touch yourself and you can already touch your children. When you contemplate a lemon tree in spring, although you don't see any lemons yet, you may see some lemon blossoms, but you know the lemons are already there. Because the lemon tree is there, the lemon blossom is there, the lemons are there as fruit. So, even if you are a young person, you are not married yet, but if you touch yourself deeply, you can already see your children and

grandchildren. A young monk, a young nun, who hasn't become a teacher, if he or she practices well, and she can touch herself and see already the presence of her disciples and grand disciples and great grand disciples in her. So, touching the present, you touch all the past and you touch all of the future, because the present moment includes all the past and all the future. If you touch one cell of your body, you touch all of your ancestors and you touch all your children and their grandchildren. This is the teaching of Lord Buddha, that one contains the many, touching the one deeply you touch the all. Touching the present moment, you touch infinity.

[Bell]

Whether you have some problems with your parents or not, I would propose that tonight in sitting meditation, you try this. "Breathing in, I know that I am the son of my father, or the daughter of my father." And we are not contented just with pronouncing the sentence. We have to see it. We have to see us as the true daughters of our fathers. We have to see the relationship, the oneness. You have only the time for an in-breath to visualize that, to touch the fact that you are truly his daughter, her daughter. If you don't succeed, try again. "Breathing in, I see myself; I know that I am your daughter." "Breathing out, I smile." I smile at the fact that I am your daughter, I am your son." Do it for a few times. Then, "Breathing in, I know I am your continuation. Breathing out, I know I am your continuation."

You don't need to imagine anything. You need only to touch reality as it is. Meditating does not mean dreaming, getting away from reality. To meditate means to touch reality as it really is, to touch such-ness. And then, "Breathing in, I know I am you, my father. Breathing out I know I am you, my father." Sometimes it is hard, but you have to succeed. Because that is true, hard fact. No one can demonstrate the opposite. "Breathing in, I know your difficulties, my father." You have to see his difficulties; you have to really see them. There were things he did not want to say, but he said it. There were things that he did not want to do to you, but he did it. You also have done it to your children, to your beloved ones, so why do you have to condemn, to blame your father? We are weak. We are overwhelmed with our difficulties, our problems; and we do things that we don't want to do. "Breathing in, I know, father, you have your difficulties," and try to see these difficulties.

If you begin to see the suffering, the difficulties of your father, or your mother especially, then naturally, compassion will be born in your heart, because you have learned that understanding creates love, compassion. Try to see the difficulties, the suffering that that person has endured in his childhood, in his

life, and that is the practice of looking deeply. If needed, you continue to practice for five, ten minutes or even fifteen; you have to succeed, because this is very important work. "Breathing in, I know there are things you wanted to do but you were not able to do." You had a dream, father, not fulfilled, and you want me to fulfill that dream for you.

A father always has dreams for his son or daughter. He was frustrated; he could not fulfill that dream that desire. Silently, unconsciously, he wants you to be able to do it. In the beginning, that desire is very strong. Later on, the suffering might cover-up the desire, but the desire is still alive. All fathers and mothers have that kind of desire. And you also. So you have to find out that kind of dream and desire, and you say, "Father, I'll do it for you." If your father did not have a chance to practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, to get the calm and the transformation, you will do it for him. If your mother did not have the chance, you'll do it for her. You practice for both. You practice for all of them, your ancestors. Cut through the wheel of *samsára*. Do not allow it to make you go around. Don't allow it to be transmitted to your children, to your disciples, for your children are somehow your disciples.

Have you practiced touching the earth? Touching the earth may look like a ritual, but it is not necessarily a ritual. There are times when you lie down flat on the earth and you surrender everything. The earth is my mother. I surrender myself entirely to her. I have come from the earth and I will go back to the earth. Lie flat on the grass and be one with the earth. That is touching the earth. In Plum Village we practice the three earth touching's. The first one is to connect ourselves with our ancestors and with our children and their children. A vertical line. In the position of earth touching you have to get linked to your ancestors and to your children before you stand up. You might use all kinds of methods, like the one I just proposed to you, "Father, I am your daughter, I am your son. Father, I am your continuation; I am you. Ancestors, I am your continuation. Ancestors, father, I vow, I promise that I will try to do what you have not been able to do, to end all of these afflictions, frustrations and to open up for freedom and transformation."

When you bow down like that and touch your ancestors, you see that you have lost your identity as a separated existence. Why? Because you realize your position in the river of being. You are only a continuation. You are only a transition. Above you there are ancestors and below you there are children and grandchildren. So you become one with the river, and suddenly you lose your solitude of being a separated existence, because you know that you are your ancestors; you are your children. You become immortal.

First you might think that some of your ancestors are not to your liking. They made mistakes. They did wrong things. Yes, they made mistakes, they did wrong things; but they are your ancestors. Your parents are your youngest ancestors. They may have done wrong to you and to other people, but they are your ancestors, your parents. You, yourself, you are not perfect. You have done good things, yes, but you have done also wrong things: to you, to your ancestors and to your children. Who are you not to accept them as your ancestors, as your parents? The ancestors, I know, some of you are perfect. I can look up to as my example, but some of you were weak and have made mistakes, but I recognize all of you as my ancestors. Because in myself, I realize that I have strength and also weaknesses. I also make mistakes. I also make people suffer; so who am I not to accept you? So you accept your parents, you accept your ancestors. So you feel much better.

If you suffer because of your children: first you think that your children will do exactly what you tell them to do, but finally you find out that they have their own ideas, their own desires and they do things not to your liking at all. You feel a distance, a separation between you and them. Sometimes you say, they are not my children; my children are not like that. I do not recognize them as my children. My children must be like this, like this, like this. Parents have a tendency to think like that. But in fact, if we look into ourselves we say, "Sometimes I did things that did not please my parents. I have shortcomings within myself. I am not perfect. Why do I have to expect my children to be perfect?" So if you realize that you forgive your children, you will love them again, accept them again.

The first earth touching is very healing. After having touched your ancestors and accepting them entirely as your ancestors, you begin to touch your children and your grandchildren and realize that although they make mistakes and sometimes they are not very kind to you, but they are really and truly your children and your grandchildren. You have to allow them a chance—because you yourself, you want to have a chance for healing and transformation—so you get into good terms with your children again. I don't have blood children, but I have a lot of spiritual children, and I have to practice that way, too. I cannot expect my students to be perfect. Sometimes they make terrible mistakes but I continue to love them, to help them, to give them a chance. That is my practice. Only in that way can you help them. So if you have problems with your parents, if you have problems with your children, your grandchildren, this is the practice. Learn more. Practice diligently every day and learn more from your own practice. And after one week, two weeks, you'll feel much better. Peace will be in your heart and between you and them.

I can tell you that there are people who attended only one session of earth touching and get that transformation. They cry a lot, a lot, during the practice and after they feel very light and they connect again with their ancestors, their fathers, their mothers and their children. You may practice earth touching in many ways. Use your intelligence and creative ideas to practice. But the principle is to touch and to look deeply to see that you are only a continuation. You serve as a link between your ancestors and your children.

Now I would like to offer you the second earth touching. It is symbolized by a horizontal line. It has to do with living beings that are now around you. When you touch the earth for the second time, you practice to link with everyone who is alive in the present moment. People in your family, people in your society, people who are happy and people who are unhappy. You have to see the interconnection between you and all of them. In the process of the practice, you might suffer a little bit, but that suffering is very helpful.

First of all, you try to touch the great beings that are around you, *Mahasattvas*. The great beings are around you; if you know how to look mindfully you will see that you don't need to go back into the past to find them. They are around you. Great beings are *bodhisattvas*: mindful beings who have the capacity of being solid, being joyful, being compassionate. You know that around you there are such people—and you need to recognize them, that is very important.

There are those who are now among the poor and oppressed everywhere in the world who continue to work for the liberation, for the improvement of the life conditions of living beings. They work during the day; they work during the night. They encounter a lot of misery, oppression, pain. And yet, they can still retain their energy and hope. They don't give up because they have a large heart. They can endure, they can embrace, they can include. They are great beings. And don't think that they are in the sky; they are around us. There are those whose names we hear, but there are countless of them that are not known to you, but they are there. Not only Mother Theresa is one. We know a few names, but there are a multitude of them, a little bit everywhere in society. In this assembly there are many of them I know personally, because they are motivated by a great desire, not a desire to consume, to get famous, but a desire to serve, to help, and that energy in them makes them very happy. They are animated by that desire to help, to bring relief, to bring joy to people. They are *Mahasattvas*, great beings. They don't give up when they encounter difficulties. They continue. They have solidity in them. They have freshness in them. They have space in them. Even if the people they try to help shout at them, they can still smile. They don't get angry at them.

I know there are many nurses on their graduation holding a candle like this. They feel the vow to help patients as a source of tremendous energy in them, but they have not encountered the fact that the patients, the sick people, are sometimes very difficult to love. They are very demanding, very difficult at times. So these nurses who started with a very refreshing, strong desire to help sometimes have to withdraw. They were not trained in nursing school about *shanti paramita*, how to embrace, how to include, how to forbear. So in medical school, I think we have to learn the six *paramitas*, to learn how to open our heart to make it big in order for us to be able to embrace and not suffer. So great beings are those who are able to embrace, to include and not to suffer.

And we should be able to connect with them—very important for our support. Every time we think of them we feel the energy coming in again and that is why during the second prostration, the second touching of the earth, you have to be able to touch them. If you get to know some of them, personally, that would be very helpful and in the process of practice, to get to know more of them and you will get the comfort that many of them are out there. You get a strong source of support. So you fill yourself with a lot of energy and you become a great being yourself.

In the later part of the practice, you see you are one with oppressed people, with the people who suffer. You see yourself as a frog singing happily in a clear pond and you see yourself as a grass snake silently advancing in order to feed itself on the frog. You are the frog and you are the grass snake. You are the poor child in Uganda, having nothing to eat. Their legs are as thin as a bamboo stick. You are him but you are also the merchant of arms selling deadly weapons to Uganda. Our countries, America, France, Germany, produce everyday products, guns, to sell to these countries. We know that the little child does not need guns. They do need something to eat. We are that child, starving, and we are also the arms merchant who is trying to sell arms to Uganda. We have to be one with all who suffer. We are those who have to survive with drugs. And we are those who try to prevent the drugs from being brought into the country.

We are everyone. The suffering is immense. And we have to identify with all of them. And yet, we do not get drowned into the ocean of suffering because we have all the *bodhisattvas*, great beings, with us. Everyday we have to touch the earth in order to see that oneness, the interconnectedness between us and all these living beings. Out of that compassion will flow. We will know what to do and what not to do in order not to make the situation worse, to bring relief to the situation. I practice touching the earth every day. And I wish that my friends also would practice touching earth every day in order to get connected. When you get

connected, all of your mental problems, mental disease will vanish. You will no longer feel cut off and alienated from the world.

[Bell]

The third prostration, the third touching the earth, is represented by a circle and this consists of giving up ideas. You know that ideas make us suffer a lot, so we try to give up ideas. Like, your idea of happiness. You have one idea of happiness and you have to look deeply into that idea to see whether that idea of happiness has made you happy or has made you unhappy. That idea may be adopted by a nation. One nation may think that this the only way to get their country happy, the people happy, and then that country is committed to that idea, that ideology for fifty years, seventy years. And there is no happiness. And finally, they release the idea. It may be too late, but I don't think it's too late, because when you abandon the idea, you have a chance. You think in order to be truly happy you have to be this, to be that, to have this, to have that, and that is very dangerous. You are committed to one idea of how to be happy and you get stuck. Happiness can come from every direction. You have to allow yourself to be free, because you have many chances to be happy. Happiness can come in one or another form, several kinds of forms. If we are committed to only one idea of happiness, we lose a lot of chances. Have you thought of looking deeply into the nature of your idea of happiness? Maybe if you can abandon your idea of happiness, you will become happy very soon.

The third touching the earth is the practice of giving up ideas. There are many ideas to be given up and today we have a chance to consider only a few. This is very important in Buddhist teachings. First of all, this body is me. The idea that this body is me, is mine, is one that we have to get rid of. You can succeed very easily, because you have already practiced the first touching and the second touching. You have begun to see that this body is not your body. This body is the body of your ancestors as well and this body is the body of your children and grandchildren. The young people in the West, they make declarations that I cannot understand. They say that this is my body. I can do what ever I want with my body. I am free. I am adult. I am more than 18 years old, so I have the freedom to anything with my life, namely with my body. So, to use drugs to commit suicide, that is my right. But according to this teaching, you don't have that right. I think legislators have to think about this. I would plead with you, those who make legislation, to reconsider, because to my insight, this body is not me, is not mine. This body I have received from my ancestors, my parents, and I have to take good care of it. Otherwise, I betray my ancestors, I betray my parents. If I use drugs; if I use alcohol; if I destroy myself; if I commit suicide, I betray all my ancestors and my parents and I also betray my children and my

grandchildren. The laws in many countries supports the idea that I have sovereignty over this body. I don't think that this is a good insight. You have a duty to take good care of your body, to keep it healthy and to transmit it to your children and grandchildren. The law should be on that line of thinking.

The Buddha said, "This body is not me. I am not confined to this body. I am life without boundary." So when this body is no longer there, I continue because I am not this body. I am much larger than this body. I am my ancestors; I am my disciples; I am my friends. I have transmitted the best of me to them, so why do I have to stop to be? So the idea that this body is me, this life span is me, you have to remove. The idea that I was born on this date. On this date I began to be. And in the future, on such and such date, I will die I will stop being. Life span is an idea that we have to give up. Before this birth date I did not exist. And after this death date, I will no longer exist. I exist only from here to here—what an idea! The idea about a life span, the idea that this body is me. This life span is my life. Most of us are caught in that.

In fact, you are not bound to this body. You are not bound to birth and death. Your true nature is no-birth and no-death. And that is the best thing you can realize with Buddhist meditation. You have to touch your true nature of birth and death. The wave has to touch water. The wave has the right to be a wave, yes, but a wave has the right to be the water also. But if the wave knows she is water, she will not be upset anymore. She will not be afraid anymore of the so-called birth and death. So you think that from here to here you are and from here on, you are not. This is to be and this not to be. Who said, "To be or not to be, that is the question?" The Buddha said, "To be, or not to be, that is not the question!" The question is whether you know the nature of inter-being. So, the third prostration is very deep. It consists of releasing the idea of you are this body and this life span is the only time when you are, when you can be. Our ancestors are there alive. Our children are already there alive. This prostration, this touching the earth will help you touch the ultimate dimension, touch nirvana, touch the kingdom of God. Please train yourself. Practice more, learn more about the three prostrations and do them every day. You will release a lot of your pain, suffering and fear.

Today everyone is requested to participate in walking meditation. I will offer some instructions on walking meditation. We will gather around the linden tree, and there will be a microphone with which I can give some instructions on how to enjoy walking. Then after that we will participate in a formal meal, because today we want to show you how the monastics eat a meal during the retreat season. The monastics have at least one long retreat every year, called rain retreat, and in Plum Village we make the winter our three month retreat. Some of

you have been on winter retreat here in Plum Village. In Buddhist countries we always have this kind of formal meal, at noontime, during the rain retreat.

We will eat together in this hall, and we eat in such a way that the energy of the Sangha will penetrate into every one of us. We eat in silence. We focus our attention on the food and on the Sangha. We eat in such a way that peace and joy is possible and we have reduced the rituals to the minimum, but still you can see something. If you have learned, you know what to do when you fill your bowl with food, practicing breathing in, breathing out. There is a poem for you for when the bowl is empty. There is a poem for you to breathe in and out when you serve the food. And there is a poem for you to sit down beautifully. In Buddhist monastic life, poetry is everywhere. You use poetry as a means of practicing mindfulness.

When you put your bowl in front of you, you begin to practice like sitting meditation, enjoying the sitting, the breathing, while waiting for other brothers and sisters to come in. Don't lose any minute of your time waiting, just enjoy breathing in, breathing out, enjoying the fact that you are here in Plum Village practicing with the Sangha. There will be some chanting in the beginning. The monks and nuns will offer food to all the Buddhas in the cosmos and to all living beings in the cosmos. That's a way of linking to every living being. They will hold their bowls like this. They use their left hand and make this *mudra* and they will place the bowl on the two fingers and these two fingers will serve to make it stable. And they hold the bowl on the level of their eyes, like this. And with their right hand they make the *mudra* of peace, and they put it like this and they chant, "I offer this food to all Buddhas and *Mahasattvas* in the whole cosmos. I offer this food to the living beings in the realms of humans, animals, vegetables, etc. And you will notice that they have a spoon and the spoon is usually made of wood. Nowadays, they make it in plastic. To avoid the noise, you see. If you are using your fork or a spoon, please double your mindfulness. Because in monastic sitting, the meal is very quiet, very soft.

So every movement should be followed by mindfulness and it must be beautiful. It must be mindful, and we chew our food 30 times at least and we know what we are chewing. When you chew, don't chew your projects, your sorrow, your fear. You only chew what is inside your mouth, namely carrots, tofu, rice and bread and be aware that this is an ambassador coming from the cosmos to you, helping to nourish you. Just put your attention on your food and from time to time stop and look at the Sangha and realize that you are protected by the Sangha. You are among brothers and sisters who practice the same and you get the energy you need. Eat every morsel of food like you eat the piece of bread in the Eucharistic celebration. In each piece of bread there is the sunshine, there is

the cloud, there is the earth, there is everything. And if you chew like that that is meditation, very deep. And you should radiate happiness and joy and all of us will profit from your presence. The spoon, before the offering, will be facing outward. Suppose this is the spoon and the monk will place it in the bowl facing outward. And after the offering, he will take it and place it inward. Now the food is for him, but before, it is for an offering. And then there will be a novice bringing a container of water and a few grains of food to the window and recite a gata to offer that food to living beings who are hungry. This is a symbol that when you eat, you have to think of the people, the animals who are starving.

In the time of the Buddha, one day a small snake came to take refuge close to the Buddha because there was a big bird trying to eat her. And the Buddha said to the bird, “ Go away,” but the bird did not accept this. So the Buddha said, “I will share with you some of my food, but leave that snake alive.” And then the bird accepted. So, this story is known. The Buddha said before you eat, you put aside a little bit for the animals. It has become a tradition that in formal meals we always offer some food to the ants, the birds and so on. So the novice will be going to a window an chanting a gata in four lines and you will see it. And then the Five Contemplations. We have reduced the ritual to a minimum because you are not used to it, and I hope that you enjoy the formal meal. We organize a one here every week during the summer retreat. So everyone is invited for the walking meditation and the formal meal, all around. This is the only day of the retreat that all the hamlets are here together.

[Bell]

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